

## OPEN FORUM

### An Indian and Pakistani CBM: The Sir Creek Trans-Border Area

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In early 1971, with the storm clouds of war ready to break later in the year in a horrendous killing deluge, India and Pakistan were still able to find common ground at Ramsar in Iran and become Contracting Parties of the International Convention on Wetlands. Today, faced with a critical need to engage in confidence-building measures that can reduce nuclear tensions, the protection of wetlands could form the basis for initiating improvements in Indian and Pakistani relations.

The resumption of talks between India and Pakistan “for the peaceful settlement of outstanding issues, including Jammu and Kashmir” was announced on 23 September 1998 in a joint statement by the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan. The talks will begin with the issues of Jammu and Kashmir and peace and security, and also address six other areas identified more than a decade ago. One of these issues is defining the international boundary along Sir Creek, a sixty-mile long estuary in the salty marshlands of the Rann of Kutch between the states of Gujarat in India and Sind in Pakistan.

In 1965, armed clashes resulted from Pakistan’s claim that half of the Rann of Kutch along the 24<sup>th</sup> parallel was Pakistan’s territory and India’s claim that the boundary ran roughly along the northern edge of the Rann. The matter was referred to arbitration and the Indo-Pakistan Western Boundary Case Tribunal’s Award on 19 February 1968 upheld most of India’s claim to the entire Rann, conceding very small sections to Pakistan. Unfortunately, the Tribunal left the Sir Creek part of the boundary out of consideration as it was deemed to be already agreed on. At issue now is whether the boundary lies in the middle of Sir Creek as India believes, or on its east bank, as Pakistan insists. Despite the differences regarding the Sir Creek issue, it is one that could be resolved relatively easily between India and Pakistan, initiating a process of an incremental reduction in tensions.

One approach to reaching agreement on the Sir Creek boundary involves the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands that India and Pakistan have already signed and ratified. Pakistan has declared Chashma Barrage, Drigh Lake, Haleji Lake, Kinjhar Lake, Tanda Dam, Taunsa Barrage, Thanedar Wala and the Uchhali Complex of lakes as Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. These total over 60,000 hectares. India has declared Chilka Lake, Harike Lake, Keoladeo National Park, Loktak Lake, Sambhar Lake and Wular Lake as Ramsar sites, totaling over 190,000 hectares. One of the criteria for declaring an area as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance is “a particularly good representative example of a wetland which plays a substantial hydrological, biological or ecological role in the natural functioning of a major river basin or coastal system, especially where it is located in a trans-border position”. Portions of the Rann of Kutch including the Sir Creek area are clearly worthy of designation as a Ramsar site. If both India and Pakistan declare their contiguous coastal portions of the Rann of Kutch to be Wetlands of International Importance, worthy of joint and cooperative efforts for protection, many of the contentious issues around the Sir Creek boundary

dispute could be resolved. An integrated plan for the development of the marine and coastal zone in this area could be developed jointly — and this could ultimately lead to further cooperation for mutual benefit in the development of ocean resources. The exact location of the boundary along the Sir Creek would become moot.

Coastal and intertidal wetlands are complex ecosystems that link land surface processes with the oceans. Coastal wetlands serve as natural filters that trap sediments and pollution present in surface run-off and intertidal movement of water, thereby regulating phytoplankton growth and fish populations in adjoining ocean regions. The roots and falling organic material of plants that grow in coastal wetlands provide nurseries and food for marine life. Protection of the Rann and a deeper understanding of its hydrological and ecological processes are crucial to the protection of the coral reefs in the Gulf of Kutch. The plume of sewage and industrial pollution travelling more than 150 km south from Karachi into the coastal areas of the Rann also needs to be studied and mitigated. Mangrove forests within the Indus delta have been largely destroyed, and there is ample scope for India and Pakistan to cooperate on regional mangrove restoration efforts.

The Red Sea Marine Peace Park jointly managed by Israel and Jordan in the Gulf of Aqaba as a part of their peace treaty makes an excellent model for the joint protection and development of the coastal areas of the Rann of Kutch. India is one of the few countries in the world with an Ocean Policy. In its closing paragraph, this Ocean Policy requires “close cooperation with both developing and developed countries in a spirit of understanding of the concept that oceans are a common heritage of humankind”. In 1998, the International Year of the Oceans, recognizing the linkages among land, coastal and ocean processes, India and Pakistan could solve the Sir Creek issue by protecting areas of the Rann of Kutch and adjacent seas.